

Point of View and Narrative Voice

Seeing and Speaking

When you've got an idea for a story, a few characters, an idea of the plot maybe, you have to figure out who is going to tell it. This is where point of view comes in. The point of view in fiction determines whose eyes the reader experiences the story through. It can be a key choice, as different points of view have different strengths and weaknesses. Narrative voice is a related topic to think about, and especially important in third person stories. First person narratives already have a narrator built in; the narrative voice is the teller's voice. But how do you tell a third person narrative?

Many Points of View

Each point of view has different problems, responsibilities and effects. The available points of view are first, second and third person. Of these, second person is very uncommon, while first and third person each have three primary variants. As you read through the descriptions and examples, think about how you might use each of them in your own fiction.

The First Person

A story written in the first person is told by an the main character, a less important character witnessing events, or a person retelling a story he was told by someone else. This point of view is often effective in giving a sense of closeness to the character. It can be very easy to get the reader to identify or sympathize with a main character when the reader is seeing everything through that character's eyes.

There are some important things to consider when writing in first person. First of all, you need to decide how this story is being told. Is the character writing it down? Telling it out loud? Thinking it to himself? And if he is writing it down, is it something meant to be read by the public? Or is it a private diary? A story meant for one other person? The way the first person narrator is relating the story will affect how you write it, the language you choose, the length of your sentences, your tone of voice and many other things. The readers should have at least some sense of this as well. The way they interpret a story could be very different if it is told as a secret diary or if it is a public statement.

Another aspect to think about is how much time has elapsed between when the character experienced the events of the story and when he decided to tell them. If only a few days have passed, the story could be related very differently than if the character was reflecting on events of the distant past. Also think about why the character is telling the story. What is the motivation? Is he just trying to clear up events for his own peace of mind or to make a confession? The reason why a story is told will also affect how it is written, and you at least should know the answer, even if it never makes its way into the text. And not only Why? but Why now?

A first person narrative is often more effective when it is a first person narrator telling someone else's story (in other words, when the narrator is not the main character). This allows a certain distance between the narrator and the events, which is impossible for the main character. On the other hand, the inability to see the bigger picture can sometimes be exploited to good effect. Whether or not your narrator is actually telling the truth is another big question (and one your readers will ask, so you'd best think about it, too).

First Person Protagonist: For this point of view, a character relates events that occurred to him; the "I" is the main character, telling her or his own story.

First Person Witness: The story of the main character is told by another character observing the events.

First Person Re-teller: The story is told, not by a witness to the events, but by someone who has heard the story from yet another person.

The Second Person

In second person, the narrator addresses the protagonist as "you." Often, this kind of story has the narrator speaking to a younger version of their self. This point of view is very rare because it is extremely difficult to pull off. The reader may feel that they are the one spoken to, and will find it difficult to accept that they are doing the things the narrator tells them they are doing. If you choose to tell a story in second person, it is very important to make it clear to the reader who is being addressed, so they can trust in the teller and accept the story as given.

The Third Person

Characters are referred to as "he" and "she" in third person. In this case the narrator (who may be indistinguishable from the author) is not a character in the story. Depending on the type of third person point of view, the narrator may know -- and be able to tell about -- the thoughts and feelings of all characters, or only one character, or they may only be able to report what is seen or heard.

Sometimes a third person narrator requires the reader to accept the narrator's authority, which they may be hesitant to do. Just because a narrator sounds like he knows it all, doesn't mean he does. This may be why the first person point of view has become more and more popular -- it can be harder to get the reader to identify with a nameless, third person teller. However, third person narration is very flexible and should not be discarded without thought. It is still the most common point of view, and for good reason.

When a writer is turning personal experiences into fiction, it is often easier to write in third person (even if he intends to put the final draft in first person). This is because the third person distances the reader (and the writer) from events. It is easier to write about personal things when you write as if they are happening to someone else. It is also easier to change events -- often necessary to turn reality into fiction -- when you aren't claiming that it was you who experienced them.

Third Person Omniscient: The narrator knows everything; all thoughts, feelings, and actions may be related to the reader (or they may be withheld).

Third Person Objective: The narrator can only relate to the reader what is seen or heard. A good writer can tell a completely objective story in such a way that the reader is able to determine the feelings and sometimes even the thoughts of the characters through what those characters say and do, even though the thoughts and feelings are never described.

Third Person Limited: The narrator is able to see into the mind of a single character. Sometimes the point of view may zoom in so close to that character that the narrator begins to use that character's manner of speech and thought, and sometimes the narrator may step back to take a more objective view. This point of view is sort of the "default" in fiction -- it is the most common because it can be used the most effectively in the majority of situations. If there is no reason not to use a third person limited point of view, then it is probably the best choice (but you will find it useful to experiment before choosing the point of view for any given story; third person limited may often work, but it isn't always the best point of view).

Whose Voice?

Now that you've seen the possibilities for who tells the story, what about how it's told? Narrative voice is not exactly the same thing as the writer's voice (as in "You need to find your voice"), though it can be. Narrative voice is another layer on the way a story is told. If you are writing in first person, for example, the narrative voice is the narrator's voice (which means it is not the voice of the writer, but the voice of a character) and involves the narrator's manner of speaking, word choice, dialect and so on. A third person story can also make use of a voice that is not the writer's -- even though the narrator is not a character in the sense that they participate in the story, they can be a character in the sense that they are not the writer.

"Natural" versus Masked Voice

A "natural" narrative voice is the writer's own voice, a voice that is as recognizable as a thumbprint to those that know what to look for. This is what people are referring to when they speak of "finding your voice" (though it's really something you've already got or that you develop, rather than something you find). The writer may instead choose to hide their voice partially or completely behind a "mask" -- the voice of a narrating character (though in order for it to remain a third person story, the narrator remains outside the action).

Tone

Tone of voice is something you'll have whether you use your natural voice or an adopted voice. It reflects an attitude towards events and the world in general, and will affect the reader's perceptions of the work. If you recognize how you feel about what you are writing, you will be able to exploit those feelings and that tone to add to your writing.

Experiment with point of view and narrative voice to see what things you can do with them. Finding the right point of view and the right voice for each individual piece of fiction is vital. Getting one of them wrong can result in a story that just doesn't quite work.